

The **billionaire**

HOW ARUN PUDUR, 34, WENT FROM A GARAGE IN BANGALORE TO HEAD ONE OF THE WORLD'S BIGGEST TECHNOLOGY COMPANIES. HE'S NOW WORTH OVER \$4 BILLION

● **GOVIND VIJAYKUMAR**

Early this March, Wealth X released a list of businessmen who had made their big billions before reaching the age of 40. Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg, 30, topped with his \$35.1 billion and at number 10, was the latest entrant — Madras-born Arun Pudur of Celframe corp. with a personal fortune of \$4 billion. And he's just 34.

Pudur's journey began in Tirupati, actually. His parents, both Tirupati Iyengars, soon relocated to Tamil Nadu and then moved to Bangalore so that father Sri Ranga didn't have to "stay in a hotel" each time he traveled to Garden City where he worked in the Kannada film industry as a cinematographer.

"Wonderful" Bangalore is also the city that gave Pudur much of life's essential lessons and his fondest memories. "Whenever I put on warm clothing... it's Bangalore on my mind. I also remember Kannada — only subject I have ever failed at."

THE GARAGE

The earliest business venture was Pudur's two-wheeler servicing garage. "There was this mechanic near my

house and I found his garage a very interesting prospect. He was from Tamil Nadu and since he didn't speak any Kannada and I could speak Tamil, we soon discussed a partnership of sorts. I borrowed about ₹8,000 from my mum and began work."

Things however, didn't start so well. "After just five months, the mechanic just disappeared. My parents wanted me to shut the garage down because none of us really had any idea of how to run one but I stood by the shop. I had started observing the mechanic and soon, I soon found myself fixing Kinetic Hondas — they were the rage at the time. I got so good at it that I could strip a vehicle and put it back in an hour 15 minutes! There were no manuals or Google, so it was all trial and error," reveals Pudur.

Very soon, Pudur's garage started attracting customers from beyond Bangalore city. "Even those bike rentals from Goa started sending us at least 60 Kinetic Hondas a month and we became one of the top non-authorized Kinetic Honda service centres in the South.

"That garage also taught me entrepreneurship, financial management, how to deal with customers... everything. I didn't ignore my studies either. Every evening I would come home, hand over my homework to mum (Pudur was in school at the time), she would go through it and only then was I allowed to enter the shop. All money went to her too."

A few years later, Pudur shut shop as dad wanted him to take college seriously and a new chapter began— dogs!

THE PUPPIES

"It was my aunt from Madras who introduced me to breeding dogs. She gave me a rottweiler, a Great Dane and a boxer to start off with. Thing about dogs is when they're pregnant they only let the person

most trusted near them. So, during my days breeding dogs, I delivered hundreds of puppies and used my marketing skills to sell the dogs for as much as ₹20,000. That was big money at the time," adds Pudur.

EARLY STEPS INTO TECH

"After college, I found myself under the employ of an individual running a training centre out of Bangalore's Jayanagar. This was the first time I was not my own boss. When I joined the company, his turnover was around ₹4 lakh a year. But I helped boost revenues to ₹1 crore — in nine months. He promised me a cut for every franchise launched but he never kept his word. That's when I learnt another lesson... insist on written agreements. Verbal deals don't usually work out."

Celframe happened much later. "We began the company in Bangalore with an aim to not become like those big 'IT labour' companies, which were just back-end operations for big Western multi-nationals. We wanted to build a radical product... focus on true innovation." That product became Celframe's game changer because Pudur and his company had done the unthinkable — take on Microsoft's Office package.

He explains his firm's difficult birth. "Competition within the IT sector is ugly, not many know about it. We faced intimidation, deals were cancelled the very next day and Microsoft tried every tool in its arsenal to bring us down... even stopping PC makers from buying products."

But Pudur and his company kept the engine running. "We tapped alternate markets... the governments, the education sector etc. Our mantra was simple. Instead of a very expensive office suite, we came at a fraction of the price — a 50 per cent reduction in operating costs. You didn't need a fancy PC to run our software either and those using Windows could easily switch over to Celframe's offering. We contacted distribution and marketing partners and gave away as much as 40 per cent of our revenue."

The tactics worked, immensely well. Celframe's office suite is now the second-largest commercial office suite in the world and has been voted 'Best Alternative for Microsoft Office'. The company's plans to become a company that will be profitable "for another 100 years".

"I have learnt much too. I used to buy private jets like candies. But I discovered that once you offload one, you lose upto 40 per cent of its value. I got rid of the jets and the houses and put the money back into the business. I'm also implementing ancient Indian wisdom into my lifestyle. For example, I have stopped taking medicines and rely on Ayurveda. I enjoy crystal clear clarity in thoughts because of the 30 minutes of daily meditation and I feel sad when doctors say Ayurveda is not proven yet. Germany is taking Ayurveda seriously! Why can't we?"

THE WAY HOME

Pudur also has a strong sense of Indianness.

"I would like to tell young entrepreneurs something... Indians do help each other out worldwide... unlike what the rumours claim. India is also not an emerging market... we're in fact a re-emerging giant. My sincere advice for all is to look inwards for solutions because the West is bankrupt, and we must not imitate their models. Look at China, they have encouraged their own firms."

In the meanwhile, Pudur Group, the holding company is planning major expansions into media, mining and real estate. "We're buying platinum mines in Africa and yes, we're also expanding Celframe's operations. I know I'll come back home once I have retired and I hope to help entrepreneurs with whatever I have learnt.

"For now, I would just say... have self confidence and know that you are special. I was diagnosed with jaundice the day I was born and was not expected to make it beyond a few days. But I did. Everyone's special... you just need to fight the odds. And don't chase the money. Cash follows... it's just a byproduct."

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